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By Paul Mulshine

I began my Sunday, as I often do, by watching "Meet the Press."

Democratic national chairman Howard Dean and Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois were competing to see who could promise Americans more new services under the health care reform program now before Congress.

After they finished offering all those expensive new programs, Durbin went on to insist that we need to "stop the obvious increase in health care premiums."

Inside the Beltway, you can get away with this sort of nonsense. But Rep. John Adler has to gain his votes outside that magic moat called I-495 that separates his party's national leadership from reality.

Last year Adler, a Democrat, won a Congressional seat that had been Republican for almost as long as there have been Republicans. The constituents in the 3rd District, which runs across the heartland of the state, might as well come from the heartland of the country. They are rural and suburban voters who endorse the fiscal conservatism of the small town rather than the big-spending policies of the big city.

Adler, who didn't get through Harvard and Harvard Law School by being stupid, has adapted to his electorate. He's remade himself as something of a "blue dog."

The "blue" in this label comes from a different color scheme from the one in which New Jersey is designated a "blue" state. A blue-dog Democrat is one who will stake out a position to the right of the party line on key issues, unlike the so-called "yellow dogs" who conform to the dictates of Dean and Durbin.

These blue dogs, of which there are said to be about 60, hold the fate of health-care reform in their paws. And they're ready to drop it, at least if Adler's remarks at a town-hall meeting Sunday afternoon were any indication.

His opening remarks to the voters crowded into a rec center on Route 9 included his objection to extending health-care coverage to "folks who don't have a right to be in our country." And he warned that the three competing Democratic plans could wind up costly for individuals and small-business owners.

"I don't want to see a health care plan that tacks on new spending and new taxes, without actually controlling the costs so business can thrive again," the blue dog growled.

These town halls have become testy, so he then laid down some ground rules. "It's okay to yell at me, but don't yell at the other speakers," he said.

Adler then listened to a litany of conservative objections to the Democratic plans. When a nurse commented on the need for tort reform, Adler said we need to get away from the practice of "defensive medicine," the excessive testing often employed to avert lawsuits. He got a round of applause when he cited the need to permit the purchase of insurance across state lines. And the crowd went crazy when he said that the primary House bill, H.R. 3200, "is very unlikely to ever even come up for a vote."

Liberals were scarce, but one woman brought up a complaint common among Democrats. She had been unemployed for six years, she said, and the current system of employer-based coverage kept her from getting insurance. But Adler rejected her call for ending employer-based insurance.

"It would be very unsettling if we shifted from that approach to an individual-based approach or a government approach," Adler told her. He didn't go all the way to the right, though, and ask the woman the obvious question: How can you expect working people to pay for your health insurance when you don't work? But that's a key point on which the Democratic plan founders, and it made me recall another segment from the morning talk shows.

After Dean and Durbin were done, the next segment on "Meet the Press" focused on unemployment. We can expect it to hover around 10 percent for years, one expert stated. That's 15 million people without jobs. But the Democrats want to mandate that each and every

one of those people have health insurance. If they're like that lady, however, they can't pay for it. So who will?

Certainly not the federal government. The president has promised that his reform plan won't add to the deficit. But every expert who does the math ends up concluding you can't give every American access to first-rate health care without busting the budget.

The attitude inside the Beltway is: Pass the law first and find funding for it later. But the blue dogs won't bite. Democrats in safe districts know they can get away with voting for a big-spending program. But those dogs who have moved onto new turf know they'll have to fight.

And they don't want to head back home with their tails between their legs.